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ABSTRACT

A method for taking structured notes from textbooks uses a set of forms applicable to the texts in almost any content area. The two major goals of this method are using all parts of the textbook chapter and placing all parts of a chapter in context. The structured notes both focus on the content and force the students to synthesize and paraphrase. The forms call for a written response to each part of the chapter and make it easier to see how one part is related to the next by condensing concepts. The form for the chapter introduction includes spaces for the title, main idea, and minor ideas. There is a separate sheet for each subheading, which includes spaces for the main idea and five supporting points. Students also note the illustrations, writing an explanation of the tie between the illustration and the point of the text it illustrates, and list new vocabulary. A third sheet provides space for a chapter summary, either outlined from the summary in the text or extracted by the student from prior notes. A fourth sheet is provided for questions or exercises at the end of a chapter. The forms are intended for use in the first few weeks of a course with substantial reading, until each student adapts them to his or her needs. (Samples of the form containing notes are included.) (HTH)

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A Method for Taking Structured Notes from Textbooks

In introducing you to a method for our students to use to take structured notes from textbooks, I will explain the goals behind the method, defend the method as a way to reach those goals, show examples of the forms in use, suggest how to use the forms after they are completed, and close with methods of evaluation and a suggestion for the step to go to after the forms are set aside.

The method suggested here for taking structured notes from textbooks uses a set of forms which I have devised to be applicable to almost any content area. The two major goals of the method are utilizing all parts of the textbook chapter and placing all parts of the chapter in a context.

Because we know our students, we know that the first of these goals is necessary. We all know, of course, that our students do not focus on the whole chapter; minds wander. Also, very often, the material at the end of the chapter is simply ignored, and a considerable opportunity is lost because of this.

Common sense and a fundamental fact from learning theory suggest that the second goal--placing the parts in a context--is sound. Placing the material in a context is important because we forget a lone fact or illustration; facts and illustrations are retained when they fit into a larger view.

Now, how do the structured notes help us to achieve our goals? The structured notes focus on the content and force the students to synthesize, paraphrase and deal with it. The forms call for a written response to each part of the chapter. Also, the notes make it easier to see how one part is related to the next because they simplify the concepts by condensing them and they draw the concepts closer together. The whole is easier to grasp when it is boiled down.

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Let's look at our forms. We begin with one for the chapter introduction. (Illustration 1) The form includes spaces for the chapter title and for the main idea and the minor ideas in the introduction. Of course, textbook chapters usually have obviously separate introductions, so most students can begin using this form comfortably.

Then, there is a separate sheet for each subjection, that is, for each subheading. (Illustration 2) Included are spaces for the main idea and for the points which support that main idea. The form gives only five spaces for supporting ideas since a text would probably provide no more than five supporting points in a subsection, and, if there were more, they would probably be in descending order of importance. Restricting the students to five points calls their attention to the more important points and eliminates some lesser ones. A space for noting the subject matter of the illustrations requires the students to examine the illustrations, whatever their forms. Then, the students are asked to make a brief explanation of the tie between the illustration and the point of the text it reinforces, if the students can see a connection. We have to remember that the illustrations are nearly always chosen for an instructional purpose. Finally, the notes on the subsection end with vocabulary entries, briefly defined.

Then, after the subsections, we turn to the chapter summary. (Illustration 3) Because some texts provide no chapter summaries, the students may have to dig out their own lists of major points from the chapter, adding the page numbers on which the points appear. These page numbers are for later use in reviewing the chapter. If a chapter summary is provided, it is condensed into a list of points.

Finally, there is a page for the assignments at the end of the chapter. (Illustration 4) The questions or exercises suggest what the author considers more and less important. On this form, the students note what the exercises indicate they should know or be able to do.

Of course, it would be expensive and tedious to fill out these forms week after week. This is intended as an introductory unit, to be used during the first one or two or three weeks of a reading class. As I will explain in a few moments, its value lies not in the production of completed forms, but in the adoption of a cognitive style.

The forms adapt easily to almost any type of textbook. Nearly any textbook has chapter titles and subtitles, and most textbooks have illustrations and chapter summaries, or, at least, questions or exercises at the chapters' ends. Nearly any area tends to produce its own kinds of aids for the reader. For example, psychology texts have a wealth of unusual photographs, such as pictures of mice conditioned to pull levers. A physical education book, on the other hand, is likely to have graphs of such things as the velocity curve on a shot put or time-lapse photographs of a technique for clearing the bar in a high jump. In the physical sciences, we find beautiful maps and photographs, with wide margins full of notations. My point is that the aids are there to use, and the aids adapt easily to the method.

Let's look now at some examples of our structured notes. The content used represents that typically found in the opening chapters of textbooks on how to read and how to study in college.

We see, again, the sheet for the introduction, with the main and supporting ideas listed. (Illustration 5) Then, we turn to the sheets on the separate subjections, (Illustration 6) which include the main and supporting ideas, the subject matter of the illustrations, the tie between the subject matter of the illustration and the text it reinforces, and vocabulary. Third, our chapter summary sheets cover the major points (Illustration 7) and, fourth, our "assignments and the end of the chapter" sheets list the concepts and skills the author expects us to have. (Illustration 8)

How are the forms used after they are filled out? The forms would be excellent to have in hand while re-reading a chapter. They would also be excellent for text review. For example, a student could make up a set of tentative test questions from the sheets, or the note sheets could be used for chapter recitations. By selecting some of the better work done on a practice chapter, we could quickly produce vocabulary flash cards or overheads to facilitate discussion of concepts in the chapter. Such use of the forms for group discussion would enrich each student's understanding of both the material read and the purposes of the method.

Evaluating the usefulness of the forms could be done as informally or as formally as we might wish. The most important indicator of the method's success is whether the students do well on the tests for which they read their textbooks. Self-analysis inventories on reading habits could suggest how often the technique is used after our students know about it. If you wanted a more formal measure, you could do pre- and post-tests, complete with a comparison group and the scrutiny of the chi-square.

What is the step to go to after the use of the form is complete? Let the people read on their own. When the students have done a chapter or two in these notes, they will have realized that they can recycle and synthesize the content, that they can see the chapter as a whole of related parts, that they expect to learn vocabulary items and that illustrations are nearly always very useful reinforcers of the content.

Simply put, the students will be more independent readers, better attuned to the chapter's intentions. The method will strengthen our students' reading even if they drop its outward signs and retain only some of its cognitive operations.

CHAPTER INTRODUCTION

TITLE:

MAIN IDEA IN INTRODUCTION:

MINOR IDEAS IN INTRODUCTION:

SECTION OVERVIEW:

SECTION TITLE:

MAIN IDEA OF SECTION:

SUPPORTING IDEAS:

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

SUBJECT MATTER OF ILLUSTRATIONS:

TIE BETWEEN ILLUSTRATIONS AND TEXT:

VOCABULARY:

CHAPTER SUMMARY

MAIN POINTS COVERED IN CHAPTER

ASSIGNMENTS/EXERCISES

POINTS AND SKILLS EMPHASIZED

CHAPTER INTRODUCTION

TITLE:

"Your Place - Higher Education"

MAIN IDEA IN INTRODUCTION:

Students make their own places —
begin careers — in the freshman year

MINOR IDEAS IN INTRODUCTION:

biggest traps:
waste of time
lack of concentration

SECTION OVERVIEW:

SECTION TITLE: "The Hours in Your Day"

MAIN IDEA OF SECTION: Every hour has to count toward your overall goal

SUPPORTING IDEAS:

1. use hours between classes
2. break up activities
3. work by your inner timeclock
4. never lose a moment to worry
5.

SUBJECT MATTER OF ILLUSTRATIONS: Students napping and studying between classes
A "night person" and a "morning person"

TIE BETWEEN ILLUSTRATIONS AND TEXT: People vary, but everyone needs to squeeze time.

VOCABULARY:

biorhythm
metabolism

CHAPTER SUMMARY

MAIN POINTS COVERED IN CHAPTER

The daily schedule must be planned

Concentration is done by the second - the minute - the use of the will

"The right reason" to go to college is a reason that means a great deal to the student

Students who hate college and just make themselves and others uncomfortable should go off to do something better with their time.

ASSIGNMENTS/EXERCISES

POINTS AND SKILLS EMPHASIZED

Planning enough hours in a schedule to do homework

Ways to overcome barriers to concentration

Finding really good reasons for going to college

Being honest with yourself about what you want